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Building Cultural Immunity to Fake News and Other Information

Executive Summary

- Fake news should be defined in terms of information presented to achieve a strategic effect
- Conventional counter-measures to fake news are unlikely to be very effective
- Adding immunity to fake information into the cultural circulatory system has great prospects
- British values form a foundation for citizens to challenge fake information in many forms
- Behavioural science, strategic communications & other domains offer resources to help
- Politicians & other public figures should take the lead in challenging fakery in all forms

What IS Fake News?

A potential way of grasping towards a definition of ‘fake news’ is that the framing of the information (real, false or a blend) is intended to have an effect on decision-making and perception (world-view) of target audiences by political actors beyond or embedded into the ownership structure of the generators of that news.

If, say, a tabloid newspaper skews reporting of events or statistics, one assumes that this merely has a reinforcement function on those who read and trust that source already. The real damage is threatened by new intermediaries (e.g. a media channel overtly or covertly funded or otherwise resourced by a foreign adversary) that can create new audiences and then build a reputation for telling the truth about world and domestic events, trends and risks which is not just biased but serves the strategic ends of that adversary.

Exaggeration of the number of immigrants by a tabloid newspaper may be very bad practice and reprehensible, but if a new channel funded by a foreign government is believed to be trustworthy, attracts a nucleus of voluble supporters and opinion-formers and it begins to make outlandish claims about those immigrants, for example, then this could have new and difficult to counter effects. Rather than reinforcing existing views – this could perhaps change minds, or at least introduce doubt into people who thought they knew how the world worked and therefore have vulnerabilities for exploitation.

Any attempt by government or the responsible mainstream and other media can readily be dismissed by the new channel’s supporters as an attempt to ‘cover-up the truth’. This is a classic conspiratorialist take, but whose reach is now beyond the fringes of the political continuum.

The channel could, of course, be the subject of complaints to regulators and even shut down – but via the Internet and satellite TV it could still be available. A strategic ambition to sow discord or just cause irritation and annoyance to the UK (or other) government would be achieved and, of course, be impossible to censor – indeed this censure would merely confirm to supporters that its ‘truth-telling’ is so powerful and reliable that the UK government needs to silence it.

In an era of competition to create 'click bait' that drives traffic from, say, Facebook or Twitter to websites (conventional news media and otherwise) – outlandish headlines and arguably scaremongering approaches enable those with malign intent to attract readers and viewers. The jury is still out in general as to whether, for example, exposure to new media channels has had any qualitative or quantitative effect on, say, voting behaviour thus far: but clearly, left unchallenged medium and longer-term shaping of perceptions could be achieved or even some 'shock' effects could be delivered.

Building Immunity to Fake News

It is not enough for academics and others just to state that an undesirable situation has arisen, that something should be done but not offer any concrete (and workable) suggestions. It is tempting to call for some kind of return to a golden age of truth-telling in journalism. But in the era of citizen journalism and the proliferation of opinion-formers and others who can reach citizens directly rather than through the pages of a daily newspaper of record, even if this golden age did exist it will not return.

That does not mean that we need face a future of dire consequences where truth is inevitably outgunned by propaganda and disinformation. What is actually needed is to out-compete those that package semi- and un-truths, and that out-competing would be achieved by building the questioning immunity of our citizens. Good old-fashioned commonsense, natural cynicism and critical thinking are – arguably – British resources and values. Ensuring that these resources and values maintain, and grow, their sustainability and adaptability for the modern era is a necessary task. Government needs to equip its citizens with the confidence and skills to challenge news and facts that are presented to it. Citizens need to be as quick to 'Google' an alleged fact or figure as they are to answer a question in a pub quiz. Of course, this requires citizens to sort through search engine returns to get beyond the myriad ones which might erroneously support the fake information. We should be confident that this can be achieved.

Embedding critical thinking by all of us in society is needed as part of a strategy to counter a strategic vulnerability which can be exploited by adversaries, criminals running email-based scams, market traders selling unproven dietary supplements and so on. Again, the social benefits and positive impact of the public being more effectively immunised against fakery – whether strategic activity, a spam message or quack medicines – would be significant.

We have already seen the benefits of behavioural science interventions in health, public transportation and beyond (see, for example, the Cabinet Office and Institute for Government's report - MINDSPACE: Influencing behaviour through public policy). I would argue that – supported by pragmatic conceptual research such as my own (on how individuals and groups can be provided with immunity to accepting malevolent ideas and practices) - tools and approaches developed in the domains of strategic communications, Information Operations and Influence Activities as well as historic political warfare activities (to name but a few) may give us some resources to develop and put into our cultural circulatory system immunity to the most obvious and egregious attempts to capture hearts and minds.¹ For example, the social benefits of rapid and effective interventions to prevent the spread and amplification of the anti-MMR vaccine lobby's unfounded and deeply disturbing claims would have been immense.

The curricula of schools and universities, modern degree apprenticeships, forms of in-work training and education; the recruitment strategies of employers and many other opportunities to inject immunity into the cultural circulatory system of the country should be leveraged to preserve and protect the integrity of fact-based interpretations, opinions, arguments and democratic processes. Politicians and other public figures should take the lead on this and initiate an improvement in their use of statistics, selective quoting and so on and raise the bar in terms of welcoming transparency, accountability and challenge – whilst ruthlessly adapting positions and accepting refutations.

November 2017

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- ⁱ Hills, M, *Always On Guard - How A Concept of Full Spectrum Socio-Technical Sensing Can Build Immunity*, in Nijaz B Always-On Enterprise Information Systems for Modern Organizations, IGI Global (2017).
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